Article

The influence of Aboriginal literature on Aboriginal students' resilience at the University of Saskatchewan

iyiniwasinahikana nawâc miywâsina ta-âpacihtâcik iyiniw-kiskinwahamâkanak ôta University of Saskatchewan

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Abstract

Indigenizing the Academy is currently an aim of the University of Saskatchewan as the amount of Aboriginal students enrolling at the university is increasing each year. This position paper argues that including and valuing Aboriginal literature in university pedagogies may serve to create a university environment that better accommodates Aboriginal students. Aboriginal literature serves notable functions for all university students, educating both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal worldviews, history, and perspectives. The paper is based on a study that used Indigenous methodology to examine how reading Aboriginal literature was a source of resilience for six Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan by encouraging healthy ways of coping with their struggles, increasing their engagement in university learning, and leading to their personal growth and transformation. The storied experiences of Aboriginal authors, in a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice, represent authors' life narratives and demonstrate to Aboriginal students that others of Aboriginal descent often persist through hardship without giving up hope. Aboriginal literature in the form of poetry, short stories, novels, or drama taps into the resilient nature of Aboriginal students and has the power to change their perceptions of their capabilities of succeeding in education.

ôta kâ-masinahikâtek

e-kwe-iyiniwastacik kihci-kiskinwahamâtowikamikohk ôta University of Saskatchewan osâm tâk-ayiwâk e-âti-mîceticik iyiniwak e-pe-kiskinwahamâkosicik. ôma masinahikanis e-tastew nawac ta-miywâsin iyiniwasinahikana ka-âpacihta osâm ôma ka-ati-mîciticik. mistahi pakwâwiyak e-miywâsiniyek kôhtinamâsiw. ka-kiskinwamâsiwak miyo-wîcihtowin ekwa mîna ka-nanistohtâtowak. ôma masinahikanis kâ-masinahâkik, nikotwasik ôki iyiniw-kiskinwamâkanak e-kî-kwecimecik tânisi e-isi-sâpostohtecik ekwa e-isi-ohpinikocik ôma ka-âhkam-kiskinwamakosicik. ohi mîna ka-ayamihtâcik tahto-iyiniwasinahikana mistahi wîcihkowak kîyâm âhta ka-ayamaniyek, kiyâpic sâposkamok.

Introduction

Aboriginal students attending university are more likely to experience steady streams of struggles attributed to colonization, Euro-centrism, and institutional, systemic and societal racism. Aboriginal students' experiences are often marked by a history of colonization in the form of trauma and intergenerational impacts (Murdoch and Gaywish, 2011; Sitler, 2008; Stout & Kipling, 2003). Many Aboriginal students hold Indigenous worldviews and perspectives that are

completely contradictory to the Euro-centric worldviews and perspectives accepted in universities (Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2002; White, Peters, Beavon & Spence, 2009). And finally, they often deal with a variety of situations rooted in discrimination and societal and systemic racism (Battiste, M. & Henderson, J. S., 2011; Cannon & Sunseri, 2011; Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2002; Henry & Tator, 2006; Murdoch & Gaywish, 2011, McGuire, 2013; White, Peters, Beavon & Spence, 2009). Systemic racism refers to both institutional and structural racism; the first of these referring to racial discrimination deriving "from individuals carrying out the dictates of others who are prejudiced or of a prejudiced society" (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 352). Conversely, institutional racism refers to "the inequalities rooted in the system-wide operation of a society… [and] to practices that exclude substantial numbers… of particular groups from significant participation in major social institutions" (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. xiv; Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 352).

An example of systemic racism for Aboriginal university students is the treatment they are given by a professor and the manner in which subjects about Aboriginal people are handled in the classroom. Professors (and teachers) have a significant role in fostering strong grounding for Aboriginal students transitioning into "a social and economic environment dominated by emphasis on information and knowledge work" (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Wotherspoon, 2008). The attributions and stereotypes these professors hold about Aboriginal people may be evident in their negative relations to Aboriginal students and in their views of Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, and methodologies as inferior or irrelevant in contemporary society. Systemic racism in this form leads to the creation of a hostile class environment and may contribute to Aboriginal student dropout rates (Alfred, 2004; Brandon, 2002; Farkas, 2003; Garcia, 2001; Riley & Ungerleider, 2008; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Willet, 2007).

Including Aboriginal literature in university courses may reinforce to Aboriginal students that their experiences are validated and open discussions that help students to acknowledge and voice their struggles. Episkenew (2009) stated that all forms of Indigenous literature—whether autobiographical, fiction, drama, film scripts, screenplays, and song lyrics—are aesthetically beautiful creations and compelling works that depict Indigenous reality. The literary works draw attention to the Indigenous experience and have the power to better the situations of Indigenous people, particularly through the processes of storying traumatic events and sharing an alternative collective myth in response to the settlers' authorized collective myth.

This research study has found that the storied experiences of Aboriginal authors, in a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice, represent authors' life narratives and demonstrate to Aboriginal students that others of Aboriginal descent often persist through

hardship without giving up hope. This study has found that when professors include Aboriginal literature in course content, Aboriginal students benefit in three ways: the literature helps students to initiate healthy ways of coping with their struggles, increases their engagement in university learning (depending on professors' approaches in validating Aboriginal literature and experiences), and leads to their personal growth and inner transformation. This study has helped to determine how a selected group of Aboriginal students found a source of resilience in studying Aboriginal literature at the University of Saskatchewan.

Historical and Contemporary Context

Since treaties in Canada were signed, several Aboriginal leaders have viewed education as a tool for preparing oneself for the future and "as a tool of self-determination" (Brant-Castellano, Davis, & Lachance, 2000, p. 213). For many Aboriginal people, education is a form of empowerment and a way to help other Aboriginal people recover from "the persistent results of long historical processes born of deliberate human actions and policies aimed at cultural suppression, oppression and marginalization" (McGuire, 2013, p. 63). There are deep roots to the underachievement among Aboriginal students, largely attributed to the historical experiences and injustices experienced by Aboriginal people in Canada that are connected to issues of land possession and dispossession.

Education has historically been used to control and subdue Aboriginal peoples and is a major factor that has created much of the subsequent social problems in Aboriginal communities. The Canadian government used education to assimilate Aboriginal children into European ways when they were taken away from their families and sent to residential and boarding schools across Canada (Stout & Kipling, 2003). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada website, the 20 residential schools that were first opened in the 1860's and located in north, central, and south Saskatchewan began to be closed down by the government in the 1970's, but remained in operation until 1996 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, n.d.). Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan (many of them Aboriginal university students) often show traumatic effects and behavioural patterns associated with their parents', grandparents', and —in some cases—their own experiences in residential schools. Stout & Kipling (2003) described such traumatic effects and behavioural patterns including, parental pathology, a high incidence of life stress, exposure to violence, low self-esteem, and "resorting to brittle or destructive coping strategies when faced with subsequent adversity" (p. 52). Many Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan are included in the number of descendants of Aboriginal people who attended residential schools all over Saskatchewan.

The continual impact of the colonization process on the worldviews and belief systems of Aboriginal people is compounded by an education premised by Euro-centric worldviews and values. Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg (2002) reasoned that to "a disturbing extent, patriarchal Eurocentrism continues to masquerade as universalism" (p. 8). This includes the way "institutions validate knowledge, recognize socialization within divergent cultures, regard first language influences, and accept different spiritual beliefs and world-views" (White, Peters, Beavon & Spence, 2009, p. 212).

Murdoch and Gaywish (2011) posed a question in their study about the need for healing in the classroom and found that "a considerable number of mature students can potentially be experiencing complex post-traumatic syndrome that results in behaviours that interfere with achieving their academic goals" (p. 101). These conditions contribute to the low academic achievement rates of Aboriginal students and having them addressed in a university education through Aboriginal-centered pedagogies is beneficial.

Whether it is trauma in their own lives, or that of their family, community, or peers, "students who are living with trauma may use a considerable amount of energy to conceal their situations and have less energy to engage in the classroom, needing all of their energy to get through the day (Murdoch and Gaywish, 2011, p. 101-102; Sitler, 2008). Trauma robs people of control, connection, and meaning, which help motivate people to set and attain goals; trauma may also sensitize Aboriginal students to feelings of incompetence and devaluation of self and efforts (Herman, 1997; Murdoch and Gaywish, 2011). Furthermore, a barrier to addressing students' trauma is the common view of education and therapy as two distinct entities (ibid.). Murdoch & Gaywish (2011) stated that education should respond to the potential of effects of both historical and ongoing trauma within classroom settings. The authors pointed to statistical evidence and accounts of lived experience of Aboriginal mature students to prove that "a percentage of Aboriginal students will be experiencing the effects of both historical trauma and ongoing traumatic events" (p. 101). The educational system can play a larger role by helping students to address these specific challenges in the classroom, particularly for adult learners in university.

These factors remain prevalent in Canadian society and institutions, working against the retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students. It is important that Canadian institutions such as the University of Saskatchewan address these factors by increasing their own awareness and understanding of Aboriginal people and in doing so, include Aboriginal people in discussions as equals so that strategies for greater Aboriginal participation can ensue. Including Aboriginal content in the form of Aboriginal literature in university courses is relevant in this case because the storied experiences of Aboriginal authors, in a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical

voice, represent authors' life narratives and demonstrate to Aboriginal students that others of Aboriginal descent often persist through hardship without giving up hope.

Using an Indigenous Methodology in a Study on Aboriginal Students

Incorporating Indigenous methodologies in research studies such as this one ensures that Indigenous worldviews, beliefs, and perspectives are valued in research outcomes and validated as holding truth, credibility, and esteem in the academic institution. As a *Nehiyaw* (Cree) person who is grounded in cultural teachings, I framed my study with a combination of Indigenous methodology and grounded theory methods to analyze and sort data. I used a conceptual research framework that was a metaphor to the *Nehiyaw* practice of *mosahkina wihkaskwa* (gathering sweetgrass) to outline the research preparation, methods, and procedure in order to demonstrate the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the research. *Mosahkina wihkaskwa* (gathering sweetgrass) is a *Nehiyaw* cultural traditional practice that carries aspects of *Nehiyaw* knowledge and worldviews. *Wihkaskwa* is a type of grass that is picked in the summer for use in prayer and ceremony.

This research was also guided by the *Nehiyaw* (Cree) concept of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin (The Good Life)* Hart (2002) to examine the resilience of Aboriginal students. While I looked at several theories to better understand the concept of resilience in terms of Aboriginal students in higher education, I primarily focused on Hart's (2002) concept for the purposes of this study, as springing back from adversity and having a good life outcome is the essence of resilience for Aboriginal people today. Hart (2002) refers to *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* as referring to the four states of self: emotion, mind, body, and spirit and the effort of maintaining a balance in the four areas to ensure the wellness of oneself. For many Aboriginal people, *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* translates into "the good life" and means "the overall goal of healing, learning, and life in general" (p. 44).

Using an Indigenous methodology in this academic research also involved delineating the origin of my worldview and being specific when applying the *Nehiyaw* methodology according to my cultural values. I expected the research would be culturally safe and respectful to others (Martin, 2003, p. 4). To achieve this, I carried out the research while relying on the protocols and worldview I learned in my upbringing as a *Nehiyaw* person so that hopefully Aboriginal participants felt their worldviews and beliefs were being respected. Furthermore, I ensured that I was responsible for protecting any kind of Indigenous knowledge that was shared by being reciprocal in my relationship with the participants. This included incorporating Aboriginal practices such as organizing a meal for the time I spent debriefing with participants, giving them

gifts in exchange for the stories they shared, as well as offering cloth, tobacco, and prayers to guarantee the research process went well.

Managing, organizing, and analyzing the data using grounded theory methods was consistent with a *Nehiyaw* methodology because it is comparable to the practice of sorting and braiding *wihkaskwa*. Grounded theory methods cut and analyze the data, which serve as an analytical tool to break down and fragment data with the goal of building it back up guided by Indigenous understanding. In this case, combining the grounded theory analysis with reflections on Indigenous worldview was comparable to braiding the sorted piles of *wihkaskwa* into sections that fit well together. In addition, I continued to journal in parallel with data collection, note-taking, and coding (Dick, 2000-2005). While initially five themes emerged from data analysis, I distilled these five themes down further to three themes with one sub-theme. In the end, the three themes became comparable to the three sections of the *wihkask (sweetgrass braid).*

Participant Selection

Selecting participants and hearing their stories was similar to gathering *wihkaskwa* (sweetgrass) from a field of grass. Just as the *wihkaskwa* is hidden in a field of various strands of regular grass and must be carefully selected, valuable pieces of the participants' individual stories were gathered and selected in much the same way. Purposive sampling allowed me to focus on six undergraduate Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan. This participatory group was currently enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan and completed a first-year course that incorporated some aspect of Aboriginal literature. As indicated in the following list, each participant chose a pseudonym with two participants deciding to use their spiritual names in their traditional language: *Nohkom Kanehkan Apit* (Cree for 'Grandmother who sits at the front')**,** *Adjgaliaq (*Inuvialuktun for 'Created by Hands'*), Chris***,** *Jimmy***,** *Cindy, and Raine*.

The Three Ways Aboriginal Literature Increases the Resilience of Aboriginal Students

Three broad themes emerged during data analysis: coping with personal and academic challenges; engagement in learning, with a sub-theme of approaches of professors in validating Aboriginal literature and experiences; and personal growth and transformation. These themes directly answered the research question: How is the resilience of selected Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan influenced by the Aboriginal literature currently taught in the post-secondary classroom?

Coping with Personal and Academic Challenges

Personal and academic challenges inevitably arose for all the participants in their first-year of university. Aboriginal literature instilled a sense of hope in Nohkom Kanehkan Apit, Adjgaliaq, Chris**,** Jimmy**,** and Raine to effectively deal with challenges they encountered not only during their university studies but also prior to this. Reading Aboriginal literature led them to believe that they were capable of persisting through difficult life circumstances.

Reading Aboriginal literature inspired Chris as he reflected back on first reading Aboriginal literature and recalled a time in his childhood when he came across Campbell's (1973) book *Halfbreed*. Reading this particular literary work and other forms of literature gave him a sense of hope during difficult times in his life:

> Reading and books and education were an escape for me because my home situation wasn't always great. I grew up in a rough situation and it wasn't always good. And for me, school was an escape. It was, I would rather be at school then at my current home situation. And yeah, books… for me books became an escape and it wasn't just Aboriginal books, it was other books.

In this case, the opportunities to read in school were a source of fulfillment for Chris and helped him to be resilient to get through difficult times that would have otherwise led him down a more self-destructive path in life.

In their first years of university, all of the participants shared struggles they faced that at times were discouraging to them. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit, Adjgaliaq, Chris**,** Jimmy**,** and Raine said they were empowered to get through difficult situations when they read in Aboriginal literature, about the extreme hardship that their Aboriginal ancestors overcame and the resilience that was required to do so. When reading Aboriginal literature, Nohkom Kanehkan Apit and Adjgaliaq stated how they were touched emotionally because their struggles related to the circumstances of characters in the literature. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit said that although reading Aboriginal literature such as *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), brought about strong emotions for her, she decided to only share certain things in university class discussions. When asked how much of her reactions to literature she shared, Nohkom Kanehkan Apit responded: "Not into great detail, like how I have been abused and stuff like that" but she dealt with strong emotions privately, as she read the literature and cried in response to the experiences resembling her own life.

White-Kaulaity Bitays (2006) stated that emotionally relating to Aboriginal literature is common, as Aboriginal authors are more likely to "write honestly about their experiences. Their voices evoke emotion while they express anger for being misunderstood, disrespected, oppressed, and colonized" (p. 12). Aboriginal literature seemed to contribute to the personal growth of

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit and Adjgaliaq when it caused them to recall emotions tied to their memories of life experiences and to cope with those emotions.

Adjgaliaq said he reacted emotionally as he read Aboriginal literature such as *The Lesser Blessed* (1996) and he believed that there are healthy and unhealthy ways of coping with strong emotions, "I recognized those emotions, where they came from and remembered the ways I coped with them before, if they were healthy ways I did the same, or if they were not, I found a healthy way to cope with them." Adjgaliaq said he recognized how reading Aboriginal literature was bringing about strong emotions for him and in this sense, healing "comes about through emotional expression, discharging turmoil and through cleansing and purifying oneself" (Hart, 2002, p. 102). Nohkom Kanehkan Apit and Adjgaliaq clearly stated how they experienced personal growth as they related emotionally to the texts and were able to overcome personal circumstances that had a continual effect on them.

Engagement in University Learning

Aboriginal literature proved to be a major factor for increasing the engagement of the participants in their university learning. They indicated that Aboriginal literature increased their engagement when it allowed them to talk about their personal experiences and to share their perspectives in class discussions. They said that having Aboriginal literature included in their courses captured their interest, especially when the literature reached them at an emotional level, whether this meant the Aboriginal literature made them cry, laugh, or feel angry.

Cindy said Aboriginal literature increased her engagement as she read about characters that were familiar to her, especially in her upbringing as an Aboriginal person.

> I remember [reading] *Medicine River* (1990), I think, kind of made me feel… makes you think a bit more about Aboriginal relations and how you treat each other. Whereas the poetry [by Louise Halfe] was more like, it makes you feel more empowered and more stronger.

Aboriginal literature engaged Cindy to a great extent in the class; she became more engaged when she was able to talk about her personal experiences and share her perspectives.

When Aboriginal literature related to the lives of the students reading it and the lives of people in their communities, four participants said they became increasingly engaged in their learning because the content was relevant to their own experiences. Jimmy described his learning about the juxtaposition of traditional and religious beliefs in Aboriginal literature such as Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005):

> In all of these pieces of literature, it's all people trying to tell the discourse between the Native spirituality and the Christians is like the Christians trying to tell these people who they are. … So to me it's like, I don't want people to tell

> me who I am because yes I come from two different backgrounds. But I'm not going to let either side to try to force me into being something that, you know, that I'm not.

Jimmy became more engaged in the course as he clearly understood the conflict between people who follow Christianity and those who follow Aboriginal spirituality that is oftentimes existent in Aboriginal communities. The representation in literature of this conflict caused him to ask questions about his own beliefs and identity.

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit, Adjgaliaq, Chris**,** Jimmy**,** and Raine said that Aboriginal literature engaged their interest when authors presented the graphic truth, the real-life experiences of Aboriginal people presented by Aboriginal authors. As well, when Aboriginal literature was used as a teaching tool that valued Aboriginal perspectives, all participants stated that they felt their worldviews and perspectives were affirmed and valued. The participants said they became more engaged in their university learning when they were invited to share their perspectives and when they felt they were contributing to the learning of others.

Approaches of Professors Validating Aboriginal Literature and Experiences

All the participants said that when they shared their responses to Aboriginal literature in class discussions, the professor's approach largely influenced how they engaged in learning about topics brought up in Aboriginal literature. The participants all agreed that they valued the learning more when the professor demonstrated open-mindedness, approachability, and enthusiasm about what he or she taught.

The pedagogical approach used by the professor, the professor's open-mindedness, and the professor's interaction with the student determined the extent to which the majority of participants became invested in their university learning. The six participants engaged most of all when professors' showed open-mindedness when they accepted students' diverse perspectives, whether or not the professor agreed with what students said.

All the participants viewed professors as appropriately handling learning situations when they allowed students to voice their perspectives, which was a form of accepting these perspectives. In particular, professors' open-mindedness was demonstrated in accepting that Euro-centric worldviews, perspectives, and values were not the norm by acknowledging the relevance of Aboriginal worldviews, perspectives, and values. The ability of the professor to show open-mindedness seemed to be the most critical factor to helping the participants become more engaged.

The extent of a professors' understanding of Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives also impacted students' engagement in Aboriginal literature. For instance, when Nohkom Kanehkan

Apit shared her perspective on family relationships and what was acceptable or inacceptable, she felt her perspective was rejected by one of her non-Aboriginal professors when the professor stated her own view on family relations and conditional acceptance of illegitimate children. On the other hand, Nohkom Kanehkan Apit's second-term English professor allowed her to voice her perspectives freely and welcomed discussions in which students gave their perspectives to topics according to Aboriginal worldviews and norms. Professors proved to effectively engage the Aboriginal students participating in this study when they shared their own perspectives while respecting those of the student.

Personal growth and transformation

All the participants indicated that reading Aboriginal literature led to their personal growth or transformation in the form of a newfound awareness and understanding, an increased capacity for critical thinking, recognizing a silenced voice that needed to be heard, and learning about the realities of other Aboriginal people through real-life stories. Reading novels, plays, poetry, and short stories by Aboriginal authors had the power to affirm their identities and free the majority of participants from feeling isolated and disconnected as they attended university.

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit, Adjgaliaq, and Chris said they began to look for other literature at the university that would further acknowledge their Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives. The inclusion of Aboriginal literature in university courses indicated to all the participants that recognizing Aboriginal perspectives was valuable to society. This allowed them to see their contributions to society as valuable, and this new understanding was in itself a sense of personal transformation.

Reading Aboriginal literature in first-year classes led to all the participants becoming more aware of the experiences of other Aboriginal people. Reading about the difficult life situations of Aboriginal authors allowed all of the participants to reflect on their own beliefs and how this impacted their understanding of Aboriginal identity. Although reading some of the literature proved difficult for three of the participants, they stated that these readings proved to build their awareness. The Aboriginal literature allowed all the participants to question the situations of Aboriginal people presented in the literature and their relevance in past and present times.

Raine stated that Aboriginal literature has a lot to offer to Aboriginal students who may have grown up in privileged homes or in non-Aboriginal communities. The literature could help those students to learn about the adversity that other Aboriginal people experience and perhaps

come to understand their own Aboriginal identities better. He said that he learned from Aboriginal literature in a similar way as an urbanized Cree-Métis youth:

> It heightens my learning, I believe it heightens also the peers that I'm taking classes with, because when you're taking these classes you're taking them with future social workers, future teachers, and future analysts. And that's what they need to… they need to be exposed to the Aboriginal literature because it exposes the truth, it exposes the realities that some of us… Aboriginals face today.

Learning from Aboriginal literature proved to be transformational for Raine, as was the case with all of the participants. Reading Aboriginal literature increased his awareness of the historical realities of Aboriginal people, particularly when the experiences were told from the point-of-view of Aboriginal authors. Overall, Aboriginal literature made it possible for all the participants to more easily distinguish the differences between Aboriginal and colonial worldviews.

The personal growth and inner transformation of the participants was also marked by an increased awareness of how racism functions in Canadian society and how it affects Aboriginal students. Aboriginal literature helped all six participants to more clearly articulate the stereotypes and misunderstandings of Aboriginal people formed by other groups in Canada. Common bias, racism, inaccurate perceptions, and stereotypes were evident to them through their personal experiences at the university. Reading Aboriginal literature reaffirmed their personal experiences with racism and stereotypes and increased their engagement in university learning.

Aboriginal Literature as a Source of Resilience for Aboriginal Students

Aboriginal autobiographical literature often has an emotional impact on Aboriginal readers and as a result, has a profound resonance on those reading it. Reading Indigenous literature is empowering for Aboriginal students because "reading literature by other Indigenous people who share the same experiences and who are able to articulate their feelings about those experiences can be a healing experience for both writers and readers" (Episkenew, 2009, p. 16). Reading autobiographical Aboriginal literature helps Aboriginal students manifest resilience in new ways as they undergo the process of both healing and learning during their university studies.

Aboriginal authors in recent published literature such as Joseph Boyden, Maria Campbell, Louise Halfe, Tomson Highway, Thomas King, and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, write down stories of characters dealing with trauma and emotional turmoil. Indigenous autobiographical writing is an act of "reinventing" the colonizers' language, manipulating the English language and its literary traditions to narrate Indigenous experiences in an effort to heal from colonial trauma (Episkenew, 2009; Gold, 2001; Harjo & Bird, 1997; Pennebaker, 1997). Aboriginal authors' acts of writing down the stories of Aboriginal people often demonstrate the

importance of believing in the possibility that things will get better even at the bleakest times. And even in stories that present Aboriginal people defeated by trauma, these stories exemplify the realities in most Aboriginal students' lives. Facing similar circumstances requires that they remain hopeful about the future and make use of positive coping strategies to get through difficulties.

Resilience meant fighting for one's survival for the participants, and working through obstacles and finding ways to overcome challenges. As well, it meant carrying on through everyday struggles, having a positive attitude, personal growth and independence, and self-motivation. And finally, a resilient student to the participants managed his or her time effectively, took initiative, and saw their university experiences as rewarding. Collectively, the participants identified resilient individuals as those who are able to prosper and succeed despite struggles, learn life lessons through struggles, and find strength within oneself through helping others. These meanings of resilience relate to the concept of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* as "the overall goal of healing, learning, and life in general" (Hart, 2002, p. 44). For the participants, part of their resilience was attributed to ensuring their own health, happiness, and well-being along with those around them.

Conclusion

Opening ourselves up to a larger reality requires teaching and learning to simultaneously grow our knowledge while respecting others and otherness (Ghosh, 2010). Therefore, it is problematic when Euro-centric educational systems across Canada use textbooks that do not recognize and mis-recognize the contribution of groups of people. Contemporary media, including films and literature used in education "have the ability to influence the construction of personal identities, self-esteem, and ideas about the world around us" (Maslin, 2002, p. 6). Media continues to perpetuate stereotypes to a large extent by racializing behaviors along with phenotypic traits. In this way "the dominant group is able to justify the unequal treatment of racialized groups… based on what is viewed as the shortcomings of those members" (ibid., p. 13). When the opportunity arises, teaching through Aboriginal literature may help educators to better support Aboriginal students. Episkenew (2009) described how "Indigenous life writing helps Indigenous readers heal from postcolonial trauma by helping them recraft their personal and collective myths" (p. 70). In particular, autobiographical literature and testimonial literature address present situations and look "for future solutions, to revolutionary solutions, and to a transformed society as envisioned by the witness telling [his or] her story" (Beard, 2000, p. 65). Stories also work for Aboriginal people to describe the way of healing, health, and wholeness (Hart, 2002).

Hart (2002) stated that through the lens of an Indigenous worldview, stories are comprehended in three ways: the sharing of general stories, the use of humour, and role modeling. The sharing of general stories allows individuals to personally discover whatever meaning in the story relates to them. The use of humor supports the release of tension, energy and knowledge development since much can be learned from the laughter stemming from particular situations. Whereas, role modeling, through the telling of stories, is "indirect, non-confrontational and supportive" (Hart, 2002, p. 57). Thus, Aboriginal literature has the power to help Aboriginal students to begin to heal or to simply learn new ways of dealing with difficult circumstances, ways that may help them throughout their lifetime.

Aboriginal literature, as a form of Aboriginal learning materials, correspond to the Aboriginal knowledge that Aboriginal students are taught within their own families and communities (Chief , 2011, Clancy, 1995). Aboriginal literature and content in classroom learning clearly influences Aboriginal students and teachers' identities and self-concepts and serves as a powerful tool to influence the identity and self-esteem of Aboriginal students and teachers when included in curriculum (Chief, 2011; Clancy, 1995; O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie, 2004).

The pedagogical approaches of professors when teaching Aboriginal literature are important to engaging Aboriginal students in what they are learning. It is important for professors to value the knowledge that all students (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) bring with them into the classroom to create a feeling of belonging for optimal learning and to acknowledge their own power in shaping students' attitudes towards themselves as learners (O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie, 2004, Haug et al., 1992). Aboriginal students often draw inspiration from the stories of others; thus, reading Aboriginal literature has the capacity to teach them how someone of their background was able to persevere over tragedy and hardship. They may be empowered to make use of their talents, abilities, and knowledge that may be useful to realizing their purpose in life and to helping others (Quigley, 2006). This paper proposes that Aboriginal content be increased in university pedagogies in the form of Aboriginal literature and by ensuring that this literature is taught in a way that is consistent with Aboriginal worldviews, perspectives, and practices. Using Aboriginal literature to teach Aboriginal university students about resilience is a valuable way to include Aboriginal worldviews in university curriculum and pedagogies. Just as *mosahkina wihkaskwa* (gathering sweetgrass) serves to heal and strengthen individuals and communities, hopefully this research may serve the same purpose for better supporting Aboriginal students in university.

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